

Professor Alan Smith

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I'm originally from East Belfast; then I came to University at Coleraine and met my wife, who is a Catholic. This was at a time when that wasn't an easy situation to be in and we left Northern Ireland for a while and worked in Zimbabwe, which was newly independent. It was there I first encountered the term "reconciliation".

Back in Northern Ireland, I was researching cross-community links between schools and that led me to integrated education. Conversations with parents in my area developed into the group which founded Mill Strand Integrated Primary School. We were working in a challenging climate; there were loyalties to existing schools, and a defensiveness towards any suggestion that community relations here were not good. My family had a commitment to creating the right environment for children from a "mixed marriage", but there was also a huge personal commitment from all the campaigners, and great excitement as the school became a reality. It took money, of course, and one of the big challenges was that the number of parents' groups was expanding and all independently applying for funding and help. This was why the Integrated Education Fund was needed. I had become involved in NICIE, and through that the new IEF.

In the early days of the IEF there was a real sense of working with the philanthropic foundations and trying to influence government – we really were creating new ways of working, new structures with the impetus coming from the bottom up. There's no doubt that my activity with the Fund and with the Integrated Education Movement paved the way for my current work in international development – and my daughters who came through integrated schools are proof of the great quality of the education.

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Alan Smith was a founder governor of the Integrated Education Fund, serving on the Board from 1992-99.

